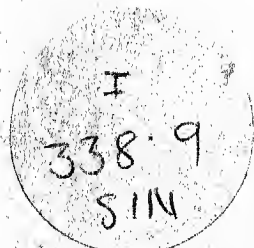
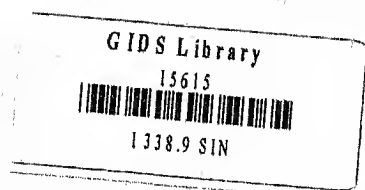


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Decentralized Planning Under
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Emerging Perspectives

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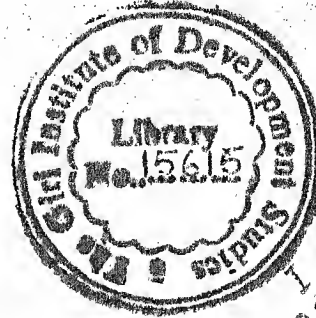
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DECENTRALIZED PLANNING UNDER FIVE YEAR PLANS :

EMERGING PERSPECTIVES

Ajit Kumar Singh



The Decentralization Imperative

Though the need of decentralized planning and people's participation has been reiterated in every Five Year Plan of India, the planning process in the country has remained largely a centrally directed and government controlled process. Plans are indeed prepared at different spatial levels (e.g., national, state, district, etc.), but the approach is 'top down' rather than 'bottom up'. No wonder, there is so much of disenchantment and apathy among the people for the development plans, whose fruits have by passed the large majority of the population. It is to rectify this situation that the need of decentralised and participatory planning is increasingly felt both in the official and outside circles.

The planning process, with bureaucratization and control as its natural counterpart, has an inherent tendency to become cumulative and centralized. At the same time all countries irrespective of their economic or political system find it necessary for operational purposes to involve local level organizations and people in the formulation and implementation of their economic plans. This requires decentralization of

political and economic powers in varying degrees, the extent of which depends upon considerations of political and administrative feasibility at any given time. This issue of centralization versus decentralization is one of the most ticklish problems that the planners have to face.

In India in the early phases of development the considerations of national security, unity and rapid growth tilted the balance in favour of centralized planning. The greater command of the centre over resources reduced the states to a position of dependency and further strengthened this tendency. The limited technical and administrative capabilities at the lower level and absence of independent leadership at the grass roots level further meant that no countervailing power could emerge to check this tendency towards centralization in planning.

Such a tendency towards centralization in planning is not a healthy one for long term economic and political welfare of the country and is responsible for many weaknesses and general ineffectiveness of our efforts for planned development. The experience of planning over the last three and a half decades has led to the growing realization that centrally directed macro-level planning would not be able to meet the basic aspirations of the people.

The vast size and diversity of the country and the considerations of administrative convenience and efficiency provide the immediate and readily acceptable rationale for decentralized planning. More importantly decentralized planning must be seen

as an instrument for making the planning process more responsive and relevant to the peoples' needs and problems. This will not only ensure greater social justice but will also release latent potential of human and material resources. Thus decentralized planning should be regarded as not only a 'cost reducing' but also a 'resource augmenting' process.¹

In the final analysis the *raison d'être* of decentralized planning lies in its contribution towards human resource development. It is a powerful instrument for building up the people's power and channelize it in a constructive manner for nation building. Thus, decentralized planning should be seen not merely as a means but also as a goal of development.

Decentralized Planning Under the Plans

The need for decentralized planning was, indeed, recognized from the very inception of the Five Year Plans in India. The First Five Year Plan while emphasizing the need to adapt the administrative system to the temper of democratic government recommended reorganization of district administration to provide for among other things (i) establishment for development at the village level of an appropriate agency which derives its authority from the village community; (ii) integration of activities of various development department in the district and the provision of a common extension organization; and (iii) linking up, in relation to all development work, of local self-governing institutions with the administrative agencies of the state government.²

The Second Five Year Plan gave a great deal of thought to the issue and devoted a full chapter to 'District Development Administration'. It stressed "the importance of planning and execution of development programmes within the district with the full support and participation of the best non-official leadership at all levels".³ It was felt essential that "local initiative in formulating plans and local effort and resources in carrying them out should be stimulated to the maximum extent possible" as "this would help to relate the plans to local needs and conditions and also to secure public participation and voluntary effort and contribution".⁴

Recognizing the need for comprehensive village planning which would take into account the needs of the entire community including the weaker sections, the plan suggested village panchayats along with cooperatives as the most suitable agency for this task. The plan document went on to delineate the functions of village panchayats in relation to development and suggested a number of measures to strengthen them.

Elaborating the need for preparing district plans the Second Five Year Plan observed :

"A state plan has to be presented in two different ways, namely, according to different sectors of development represented in it and according to regions and districts. . . . Thus, a district plan would include programmes prepared on a territorial basis for villages, groups of villages, talukas,

extension blocks, municipal areas, etc., and also programmes to be derived from departmental plans formulated at the state level. That part of the district plan which is prepared within the district is important both for the range of activities which it embodies and for the fact of association with the people at every level, and the opportunity afforded to them to determine their needs and to contribute towards their fulfilment".⁵

The plan outlined as many as 16 areas as the main constituents of a district plan including the community development and national extension programme, agricultural production programme and allied activities, cooperatives, panchayats, village and small industries, housing and urban development, social services, welfare of backward classes, land reforms and dissemination of information about programmes of national, state, regional and local development to name the most important only.

The Second Five Year Plan went on to emphasize the need for creating a well-organized democratic structure of administration within the district, which should gradually take up the responsibility of general administration and development of the area. The plan suggested the setting up of district development council and development committees at the district and block levels respectively and outlined their composition and functions. These were to act mainly as advisory bodies.

The Study Team on Community Development and National Extension Service headed by Balwant Rai Mehta lamented the failure of the community development programme to evoke popular initiative and suggested the creation of a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj institutions to carry out the task of democratic decentralization.⁶ The report of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee aroused great public enthusiasm and found the wholehearted acceptance of the Government. This was followed up by legislative measures in different states for setting up Panchayati Raj institutions.

Describing these measures as a most significant step forward the Third Five Year Plan regarded the growth of Panchayati Raj institutions as one of the principal task to "enable each area to realise its maximum development potential on the basis of local manpower and other resources, cooperative self-help and community effort, and effective use of the available resources and personnel".⁷ It was pointed out that local plans should be worked out as a means for the more effective implementation of the State Plan. While the emphasis on village production plans was reiterated it was suggested that along with the district the block should serve as a unit of planning and development.⁸ Within the general framework of the district plan, the block plan was intended to include all social and economic activities undertaken within the block. As far as the question of district administration was concerned the plan did not go beyond making a call for some measure of rationalization and fresh definition of functions and relationships to remove overlapping between different departments and organisations.

The euphoria generated by the initial efforts at democratic decentralization, however, did not last long. The progress of setting up Panchayati Raj institutions was halting and uneven. Except in a few states like Maharashtra no serious attempt was made to entrust to them the responsibility of development administration. The conflicting bureaucratic interests and political pressures saw to it that these bodies remained anaemic or defunct and elections to Zila Parishads have often been kept in abeyance for years at a stretch.

The Draft Fourth Five Year Plan reiterated the necessity of the fuller and more active involvement of the Panchayati Raj in the process of economic development and social advance, but did not elaborate measures to achieve this. Talking about the district planning it observed that "If State Plans are to succeed, their formulation in relation to physical features and resources and the institutional organisations in each area is the first requirement".⁹ But no concrete steps were suggested apart from calling for diffusion of initiative, decision making and participation.

One of the main reasons for lack of concrete progress towards decentralized planning, in spite of repeated assertions for its need, was lack of adequate thinking about the content and operational aspects of local planning. The first noteworthy attempt in this direction was by Professor D.R. Gadgil in the form of a public lecture.¹⁰ Expressing the view that planning from the bottom has to be associated chiefly with the district development planning effort Gadgil rejected the village as the

lowest area unit of planning, though he accepted the need for dividing the district into convenient areas, taking the mandi as the most appropriate area, for formulation of an integrated plan for the lowest level area unit. He went on to elaborate at considerable length the various stages and aspects of planning at the district level.

Soon after, the question of planning at the district level was examined at length by the Study Team on Machinery For Planning appointed by the Administrative Reforms Commission.¹¹ The Study Team justified the necessity of grass roots planning in terms of its effectiveness for the best use of land and manpower, its ability to evoke greater popular participation and its contribution to fostering the democratic system. The Study Team examined the reasons for the continuing ineffectiveness of attempts at district planning and suggested remedies for removing these defects. It emphasized that "the core of District Planning should be related to those sectors of development where local variations in the pattern and process of development are likely to pay dividends in terms of the rate of growth".¹² It advocated integrated approach towards the development of the urban and rural areas in the district and pleaded for giving the district planning authorities a much clearer understanding of the resources that would be available to them for the development purposes and for reducing the rigidity regarding outlay for different sectors in deciding upon the financial assistance to the district.

In several important respects, however, the thinking of the study team was at variance with the approach of the earlier plans. It thought that at the present moment it was not practical to think of any area smaller than the district as a suitable unit of planning though it added that wherever possible Community Development Blocks could be made responsible for the preparation of agricultural plans for the blocks.¹³

Even more sharp deviation was its opinion about the role of Zilla Parishads which were earlier visualized as the main link in district development administration. It opined :

"The Zilla Parishads would normally have no representation of urban areas and are therefore not likely to be the best agencies for ensuring a balanced plan for the district as a whole. Apart from this, the Zilla Parishads would be large bodies which cannot be operationally effective for the purpose of formulating a district plan. It would also be necessary to involve persons from fields other than the Panchayat Parishads and the Municipalities to ensure proper understanding of the District problems and for the purpose of preparing balanced District Plans. We would, therefore, recommend that there should be a District Planning Committee consisting of the representatives of the Zilla Parishad, Municipal Bodies in the district, professional talent in the District and with appropriate association of the district officers - developmental and others".¹⁴

The Fourth Plan underlined the need for strengthening the planning machinery at different levels. Detailed guidelines for the formulation of district plans were issued by the Planning Commission in 1969. The guidelines were fairly comprehensive and spelled out the approach and different stages in district plans and indicated the data requirements and the format in which the district plans were to be presented. The 'guidelines' may be regarded as the first concrete step towards operationalizing the concept of district plans.

The period since the early seventies saw important changes in the planning process in terms of strategy, approach and organizations. With emphasis shifting to social justice, the target group approach came into prominence and several programmes aimed at poverty removal and employment creation were adopted the most notable being MFAL, SFDA, IRDP, DPAP, NREP, RELGP and Tribal Area Development Programme. With the launching of these programmes the need of micro level decentralized planning came to be increasingly realised. The process also saw the proliferation of a number of organizations and agencies at the district level, which further complicated the task of district planning.

In the last decade efforts have been made to operationalise the process of decentralized planning. Important contribution in this direction were made by the Working Group on Block Level Planning (1978), The Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions (1978) and the Working Group on District Planning (1984). Their contributions may be briefly reviewed.

The Working Group on Block Level Planning under the chairmanship of Prof. M.L. Dantwala endorsed the need for block level planning for better utilization of local resources and to make a concerted attack on problems of rural poverty and unemployment.¹⁵ It made an important contribution to local level planning by elaborating the objectives, scope and methodology of block level planning. However, the working group felt that it may not be within the technical competence of block level administration at present to prepare such plans. It, therefore, suggested involvement of outside experts and institutions in preparation of block plans. At the same time it suggested the strengthening of district level planning machinery and training of district and block level officials. The working group also favoured peoples' participation in formulation and implementation of block plans by strengthening Panchayati Raj institutions. Following the submission of the Report of the Working Group the Planning Commission issued guidelines for the formulation of block level plans in 1979.

The Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions which submitted its report in 1978 reviewed the uneven progress of these institutions and their structural inadequacies and opined that they have not been given a chance to serve as a vanguard of development in village India.¹⁶ The Committee felt that development work in future needs intricate designing and greater coordination which would be unwise to attempt at a State level.¹⁷ It was of the view that Panchayati Raj should emerge as a system of democratic local government, discharging development, municipal and, ultimately, regulatory functions.¹⁸

For carrying out their developmental functions, it was suggested that the district planning unit consisting of a professionally qualified team should be placed within the Zilla Parishad under the direct supervision of the Chief Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad.¹⁹ The Committee regarded the district as the first point of decentralization below the state level. For levels below the district the Committee rejected both the block and the village as the suitable unit for grass root planning. Instead, it favoured the creation of a new level called Mandal Panchayat consisting of a cluster of villages, which was to become the hub of developmental activities next to the district.

The Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions envisioned a fundamental change in the role of district plans under the new set up. Elucidating this it observed :

"The PRIs under the district and other levels are not merely a forum for obtaining the views of the popular representation but in due course should be capable of planning the most suitable schemes that they consider will be appropriate for them. The PRIs should now get used to the District Planning, the developmental details and effective monitoring and supervision. The ultimate objective should be to develop the capacities in them to plan for themselves within given resources and those that they can raise by themselves. While at present they may be working within the state level targets and structure, the District Plans will influence the state and the central plan when resources placed at their disposal become available,

increasingly used in a flexible and relevant manner, to the needs of the District".²⁰

The Working Group on District Planning examined the various aspects of the problem in great detail in its Report.²¹ It thoroughly endorsed the need for decentralized district planning in the absence of which past attempts in this direction have failed to yield desired results. It advocated the concept on integrated area planning within the framework of multi-level planning. Arguing against the prevailing dysfunctional fragmentation in planning activities it advocated the creation of a single body for carrying out this task:

"In our concept of District Planning, the District is seen as a sub-system of multi-level planning. The totality of all planning activities at the level of this sub-system would vest with a single District Planning body who would determine the priorities and allocate funds accordingly among the various development sectors".²²

The working group went on to add: "when this change has been affected, a large part of the public resources would be mobilised and controlled by the district itself. It would also imply that the district will have the largest say in the utilization of resources allocated to it by the State. In such a concept of district planning, the district set up will have its own decision making authority and control over the whole range of developmental functions assigned to the district level".²³

The Working Group has made a signal contribution towards operationalization of district planning process by giving elaborate suggestions on different aspects of district planning including its pre-requisites, methodology and problems of coordination and integration. The Working Group favoured the district Collector as the Chief Coordinator for district planning for which he should be given appropriate powers and responsibilities. It also gave suggestions for setting up a multi-disciplinary team for plan formulation at the district as well as the block level.

While the Working Group emphasized the need for popular participation at various levels, it did not favour the Panchayati Raj institutions for this task as in its view "the formal channel of participation through the Panchayati Raj Institutions with a view to adhering to democratic principles, has not guaranteed actual peoples' participation in the running of the affairs at the local level".²⁴ Instead, it favoured developing new forum of popular participation through all kinds of spontaneous action groups. The failure of the Working Group to visualise decentralized planning within the umbrella of the democratically elected Panchayati Raj bodies may be regarded as the weakest spot in its report. This is in stark contrast to the thinking on this issue embodied in earlier Committees and amounts to setting up a body without infusing it with the proper spirit.

Recent Attempts

The reports of the above mentioned Committees and Working Groups had considerable impact on the process of decentralized planning in the country. Both the Sixth and Seventh Five Year Plans put considerable emphasis on local area planning and asked for considerable delegation of powers to area planning bodies. They also called for activating and strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions for democratic management of rural development both at the district and the lower levels.

In practice, however, these institutions remained moribund with few exceptions and the process of decentralized planning was sought to be carried out through bureaucratic channels. Hence efforts were made to strengthen the planning machinery at different levels. The centrally sponsored scheme of strengthening the planning machinery at the state level which was working since 1972-73 was extended to the district level from 1982-83.

In recent years a number of concrete steps have been undertaken at the state level, particularly in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, U.P. and Jammu & Kashmir, to decentralize the planning process more effectively at the district level.²⁵ The salient features of these attempts include the following :

- (i) Identification of district sector schemes;
- (ii) Disaggregation of plan funds between the State sector and the district sector;
- (iii) Determination of the share of individual districts on the basis of selected indicators giving weight to backward areas;

- (iv) Setting up of district planning bodies consisting of officials of various departments, elected representatives of people and nominated persons;
- (v) Creation of a technical planning machinery at the district level consisting of 2 to 6 officers;
- (vi) Laying down new procedures for the release of funds, their reappropriation, etc.

Essential Requisites

From a review of the Plan Documents, and Reports of various Committees and Working Groups, there emerges a clear consensus on certain pre-requisites and essential features of decentralized planning, though there is still lack of clarity regarding direction with respect to certain other aspects :

Firstly, the imperative of decentralization in planning is conceded by all in order to relate the developmental effort to the specific resource endowment, potential and need of each area and for eliciting popular participation in plan formulation and implementation.

Secondly, the district level planning is regarded as the central pivot in the decentralization process, which can provide a link between grass root planning and state level planning.

Thirdly, it is felt that integrated area planning at the district level is feasible only when the multiplicity of planning organizations is ended and the totality of planning activities are put under a single district planning body, with necessary status, power and resources.

Fourthly, the attempts at ensuring straight jacket sectoral programmes from above should be done away with in order to relate decentralized planning in a meaningful way to local conditions. It would imply that the district levels planning body should have the longest say in deciding about the sectoral allocation and utilization of the resources put at its disposal.

Fifthly, there is need to carry the process of decentralized planning gradually to lower levels by developing their planning capabilities. It is generally felt that the village is too small a unit for micro level planning. The block or a cluster of villages or mandi areas may be a more appropriate unit for area planning.

Sixthly, it has been repeatedly emphasized that the Panchayati Raj Institutions at different levels are the most appropriate bodies to be made responsible for decentralized planning and they should be strengthened so as to carry out effectively the developmental functions which legitimately belong to them.

Finally, the ideal of democratic decentralized planning can be attained only in steps by building up suitable structures and procedures, bringing out required attitudinal changes, and setting up competent multi-disciplinary teams for carrying out planning functions at different levels.

Assessment

Judged in the light of the above mentioned requisites of decentralized planning the recent attempts though welcome still fall

short of the ideal.²⁶ The distribution of power and resources is still tilted in favour of the states. In many cases the actual allocation to the district sector is less than what was contemplated. The division of schemes between the state and the district sector has also not been worked out fully satisfactorily due to the resistance of the state level bureaucracy. The district plans do not fully meet the requirements of an integrated area development plan and continue to be dominated by the sectoral approach. The biggest limitation of the recent developments is, however, that the organizational set up envisaged for decentralized planning has failed to make them a suitable instrument of participatory planning, conceived as it is outside the framework of the Panchayati Raj Institutions, with few exceptions like Karnataka. Thus, the scheme does not go far enough to allow for peoples' mobilization and restructuring of district planning to meet local needs and aspirations. What has been actually achieved so far is a limited transfer of power and resources to the district level and simplification of certain administrative and financial procedures.

The Interplay of Counter Forces

The halting and inadequate progress towards genuine decentralized planning in the country in spite of repeated assertion of commitment to the same brings out sharply the pitfalls and problems of decentralized planning and the interplay of counter political forces inherent in the process. As we have observed elsewhere :

"The conflict between centralization and decentralization primarily centres around the issue of who wields control over the enormous and growing plan funds, with all its political ramifications. This conflict takes place at two levels - firstly between the political leaders (supposed to be the peoples' representative) and the bureaucrats running the planning apparatus (though occasional liaison between them is not ruled out); and, secondly, between the lower and higher echelons of political and bureaucratic hierarchy. The tussle is becoming increasingly fierce over the years. The emergence of regional parties is one manifestation of this conflict. A satisfactory and acceptable resolution of these conflicts is necessary in the national interest.

The political leadership as well as bureaucracy at different levels while talking of the ideology of decentralized development in principle are unwilling in practice to go the whole hog and allow greater say to local people in the planning process for fear of losing their influence and power. As pointed out by the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions the bureaucracy had its own role in dissociating the PRIs from the development process and were averse to PRIs being entrusted with additional functions and were not easily willing to get adjusted to work under the supervision of elected representatives.²⁸ Similarly the political elite at higher levels showed a lukewarm attitude towards strengthening of the democratic process at the grass roots. As the committee went on to point out : "of particular

significance in this connection is the relative cooling off of enthusiasm of MPS and MLAs in some states, because they would perceive a threat in emerging Panchayati Raj leadership to their position in their respective constituencies. In the ultimate analysis, all this led to a weakening of political support to PRIs and of the administrative will to work through them".²⁹

Without such a political support and administrative will democratic decentralization cannot hope to succeed. If the dream of democratic decentralization has to be realized there has to be a determined effort both at political and bureaucratic levels to share power and resources with lower level organizations. Thus, a genuine programme of decentralized planning with peoples' participation in a real sense would require a radical departure from the existing planning mechanism and procedures and above all a new kind of attitude and approach based on an unshakable faith in the people and their capacity to help themselves. In this scheme of things the role of state government would be that of supporting and encouraging lower level institutions instead of that of controlling, directing and ordering them.

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25. For a detailed discussion of these attempts see Ibid., Vol.II.
26. The author has reviewed critically the U.P. experience in decentralized planning elsewhere. See Ajit Kumar Singh, op. cit., pp.52-54
27. Ibid., p.50
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